



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Holding 'surprise wide open'

Citation for published version:

Jack, A 2020, 'Holding 'surprise wide open': Meeting the paralysed man lowered through the roof in the poetry of Seamus Heaney', *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 69, no. 2.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Christianity and Literature

Publisher Rights Statement:

The final version of this paper has been published in <Journal>, Vol/Issue, Month/Year by SAGE Publications Ltd, All rights reserved. © <Author's name>, year of publication. It is available at: <http://<Acronym>sagepub.com/>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Holding 'surprise wide open': Meeting the paralysed man lowered through the roof in the poetry of Seamus Heaney

Alison Jack

a.jack@ed.ac.uk

School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh,

Mound Place, Edinburgh EH1 2LX

Alison Jack is Senior Lecturer in Bible and Literature at the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh. Her most recent publications include *The Prodigal Son in English and American Literature: Five Hundred Years of Literary Homecomings* (OUP 2019) and a co-edited volume, with Caroline Blyth, *The Bible in Crime Fiction and Drama: Murderous Texts* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

Holding 'surprise wide open': Meeting the paralysed man lowered through the roof in the poetry of Seamus Heaney

Abstract: Seamus Heaney refers to the Gospel story of the healing of the paralysed man lowered through the roof directly in 'The Skylight', 'Miracle' and 'The Latecomers'. It is argued that each of these poems reflects aspects of the Lukan, Markan and Matthean version of the story respectively. Furthermore, these poems transform the story into a metaphor for theological reflection: in 'The Latecomers', on the nature of Christ; in 'Miracle', on humanity; in 'The Skylight', on poetic inspiration. The open roof, what is left behind after the miracle has happened, offers a profound perspective on the meaning of life and what lies beyond.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, Jesus, Gospels, healing miracles

The poem, in other words, must be all of a piece, must grow its own legs, arise, take up its bed, and walk.¹

The healing miracles of Jesus narrated in all four Gospels offer Seamus Heaney a vocabulary of transformation which he returns to frequently in a variety of contexts. The story of the paralysed man who is brought by others to be healed (Matthew 9.2-8; Mark 2.1-12; Luke 5.17-26, all references taken from the RSV) seems to have particular appeal. Aspects of it

¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Sixth Sense, seventh heaven', *The Dublin Review* 8, (Autumn 2002): <https://thedublinreview.com/article/sixth-sense-seventh-heaven/>.

are referred to directly in at least three poems ('The Skylight', 'Miracle' and 'The Latecomers') and the image of the opened roof, which comes from the Markan and Lukan version of the story, is returned to even more frequently.² In this paper the significance of the story of Jesus' healing of the paralytic in its different Gospel versions will be explored in Heaney's work. It will be suggested that Heaney views the story from several perspectives from within the story itself. He also uses it as a metaphor in theological reflections on the nature of Christ, humanity, and poetic inspiration. The relationship between the opened roof and transformation from one state to another is effectively focused through both oblique and direct references to the Gospel miracle in its varieties of expressions.

Heaney inhabits the story of the healing of the paralytic from within, taking on the perspective of the owner of the house where the miracle took place in 'The Skylight', those who lifted the paralysed man through the roof to get him to Jesus in 'Miracle', and Jesus himself in 'The Latecomers'. I will consider these poems in turn with a view to aligning them with the particular emphases of each of the Gospel writers and their tellings of the story. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Heaney reflects these emphases in different ways and offers a sophisticated exegesis of the biblical passages. Heaney's personal and shifting religious beliefs have been the subject of scholarly debate,³ of course, but will not be the focus of this paper. Instead, the presence and significance of the miracle story in his poetry

² In various forms, it may be traced in several of the poems in the 'Lightenings' section of the 'Squarings' sequence, for example: in 'Shifting brillancies'; 'Roof it again'; 'Squarings?'; 'And lightening?'. It might also be argued that the image of the opened roof is implicit in the famous 'The annals say' in this collection, which is to be found in Heaney's *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).

³ See, for example, the detailed discussion of the relationship between Heaney's beliefs and his poetry in John Dennison, *Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), and of the relationship between his work and the waning influence of Roman Catholicism in Ireland in Eugene O'Brien, "'An Art that Knows its Mind": Prayer, Poetry and Post-Catholic Identity in Seamus Heaney's "Squarings"', in *Études irlandaises* [Online], 39-2 | 2014, URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/3989> ; DOI :10.4000/etudesirlandaises.3989.

and prose will be explored in dialogue with a range of biblical references, all of which reflect on the story and its creative reach.

In his *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction*, Richard Rankin Russell notes that 'The Skylight' relates to Heaney's wife's decision to have a skylight cut into his attic study in Glanmore Cottage.⁴ The poem is published in the collection *Seeing Things* from 1991, from the section 'Glanmore Revisited'.⁵ The octave of the sonnet focuses on the enclosed, uncut space, 'low and closed' with the 'perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling'. The speaker 'opposed' the 'Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove'. The rhyming scheme is tight and controlled, reflecting the contained and constrained nature of the room. The rhyming scheme breaks down in the sestet, following the lynchpin moment of the slates' removal. Now 'extravagant/Sky entered and held surprise wide open'. It is at this point of contrast and amazed exuberance that the story of the healing of the paralysed man is introduced, but not from the perspective of the man himself. Instead, the speaker identifies with 'an inhabitant/Of that house' where the healing took place. He has not been healed but he has experienced the amazement of those who witnessed the miracle. Like them, it is as if he has watched the man move from being passively 'lowered', having his 'sins forgiven', and being 'healed', to actively taking up his bed and walking 'away'. For Russell, the poem 'signifies a new commitment to poetry's buoyancy and potential- to its ability to open spiritual windows beyond ourselves'.⁶ It also signifies a particular reading of the Gospel story.

⁴ Richard Rankin Russell, *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 149. The Heaneys had taken the opportunity to purchase Glanmore Cottage from Anne Saddlemeyer in the 1980s, having rented the cottage from her in the 1970s when they decided to move to County Wicklow from Belfast.

⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).

⁶ Russell, *Seamus Heaney*, 149.

In the Synoptic Gospels there are three versions of a story about Jesus healing a paralysed man who has been brought to him through the crowds. In Mark, usually considered the earliest of the Gospels, Jesus is 'at home' (2.1) in Capernaum when crowds come to hear him preach the word. Four men bring a paralysed man on a 'pallet' (2.4). When they find they cannot get near to Jesus, they remove a part of the roof and make an opening above where Jesus is, and lower the man through it. Jesus, on seeing 'their faith', asserts that the man's sins are forgiven (2.5). Nearby scribes are described as questioning the authority of Jesus to forgive sins, which is the role of God alone. Jesus intuitively feels their disquiet and offers to demonstrate that he has the authority to forgive sins by healing the man of his paralysis, by implication an easier, and certainly a more visible, task. In doing so, he refers to himself as the 'son of man', a title which is found in all three Gospels at this point. He commands the man to take up his pallet and go home and the man immediately obeys, 'going out before them all' (2.12). The response of the crowd is amazement at the uniqueness of the events they have just witnessed, and they glorify God.

In Luke's Gospel, the setting is unspecified but the audience is identified from the start as including Pharisees and teachers of the law who have come from far afield, including from Jerusalem. It is explicitly noted that on this occasion, the 'power of the Lord was with [Jesus] to heal' (5.17). Men bring a man on a 'bed' who is paralysed and, on finding the crowds are too great for them to get close, they go up onto the roof and lower him through the 'tiles' (5.19). Luke has raised the status of the man and the nature of the house, reflecting perhaps the Greco-Roman rather than Judean background of his readership. As in Mark, however, Jesus asserts that the man's sins are forgiven, having seen 'their faith', and the onlooking scribes (and Pharisees in Luke) begin to question Jesus' authority. In response, Jesus tells

the man to get up, take his bed and go home, which he does. In Luke, the reaction of both the man and the crowd is heightened: the man, like the crowd, is described as 'glorifying God'; and the crowd themselves are 'all' 'seized' with amazement, 'filled with awe' and they exclaim they have 'seen strange things today' (5.26).

The events of the story are somewhat different in Matthew's Gospel, although there is little doubt that he is drawing on the same Markan source. Here, Jesus has returned to 'his own city' (9.1) and a paralytic is brought to him on a 'bed', but there is no entry through the roof. Seeing 'their faith', Jesus tells the man, 'Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven' (9.2) and this provokes a simple charge of blasphemy from some of the scribes. Only in Matthew is this response labelled 'evil' (9.4). The command to the paralysed man is the same as in Mark and Luke, but here there is no sense of urgency (no 'immediately') in the man's reaction and the man is described simply as going home. Only in Matthew is the response of the crowd one of fear, although they do glorify God, who is described as giving 'such authority to men' (9. 8).

In Heaney's 'The Skylight', it is Luke's version of the healing story which is drawn on and re-interpreted in the new context. The setting is one of conflict and opposition from the start ('You were the one for skylights, I opposed'), reflecting the unique setting of Luke's narrative, in which the widespread and Jerusalem-centred opposition that will lead to Jesus' arrest is highlighted from the beginning of the pericope. The 'slates' which come off at the start of the sestet are certainly closer to the 'tiles' of Luke than the earthen roof implicit in Mark's version of the story, which have to be dug through. While forgiveness and healing are aspects of all three Gospels, and are mentioned in that order in the poem, the speaker's

response to the moment of revelation aligns the poem with Luke's description of the crowd's reaction to the healing. The sky is 'extravagant'; surprise is held 'wide open': here is the 'awe' with which only Luke's crowd is filled. It is not that the speaker has 'never seen anything like this' (Mark 2.12). Rather, that he has 'seen strange things today' (Luke 5.25) and '[f]or days' after. The poem reflects perhaps the intriguing Greek word *paradoxa* of Luke's Gospel, translated here as 'strange/extraordinary things' but closer to the holding together of irreconcilable views, a paradox. In the breaking through of the roof, the warm fit and perfect security of the past has been lost and the speaker is left with an open emptiness, the aftermath of unexplainable event which has happened to someone else. But the effect is exhilarating and unexpectedly transformative, aligned to the miraculous. In all of the Gospels, it is not specified whether or not those who initially opposed Jesus should be counted amongst the crowd who react positively to this miracle (the 'all' of Mark and Luke), signalling their conversion. In the poem, this ambiguity is resolved and the speaker who opposed the skylight has been converted, to his own amazement.

In Luke's version, as in Matthew's (but not Mark's), the healed man is described as having obeyed Jesus and gone 'home'. In the closing line of 'The Skylight', this ending is rejected in favour of Mark's more open resolution of the story. In the poem, the healed man 'walked away' just as Mark's healed man 'went out before them all' (Mark 2.12), with no reference to his going home. In this Gospel, it is Jesus who is specifically described as being at home (2.1), and although Jesus tells the healed man to 'go home' (as he does in all three Synoptic Gospels), in Mark alone the man seems to seize his freedom to expand his horizons. The poem highlights the disconcerting nature of the change which has opened up such radical and unspecified potential, with the loss of the 'hutch and hatch' of the past. When the

poem is read alongside Luke's version of the story, the context of opposition to the change, a sense of awe in the presence of all it has brought about, and a lingering need to hold both together in a new way in the empty space left behind, are all brought into sharper focus. The subtle shift to a more Markan ending draws on that Gospel's refusal to close down narrative interpretation, most famously in its unresolved resurrection narrative (16.1-8), and invites the reader to imagine the range of possibilities open to the healed man and to the poet.

The focus shifts in the poem 'Miracle', in which the reader is presented with the experience of the ones who bring the paralysed man into the presence of Jesus, at great personal cost. The perspective remains that of an onlooker, who instructs the reader to 'Be mindful of them', but the respect for their commitment and tenderness, based on the deep bonds between the paralysed man and his bearers ('the ones who have known him all along'), is obvious. The poem is found in the collection *Human Chain*,⁷ published after Heaney's stroke in 2006. It is often associated with that event and to the efforts of his friends to get him out of the house where he and his wife were visiting and into the ambulance at the door.⁸ The poem begins at the end of the Gospel story with the man who takes up his bed and walks but it immediately directs the reader away from that 'miracle' to the miracle of the effort of the friends. Their physical toil is emphasised ('the ache and stoop deeplocked/In their backs') as is the passivity of the paralysed man, who has to be 'made tiltable' before the process of raising and lowering through the roof. I suggest that it is Mark's version of the story which is reflected here. Only in Mark are the bearers identified as 'four men' (2.3),

⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

⁸ See Russell, *Seamus Heaney*, 208.

rather than just 'the men' of Luke and the 'they' of Matthew: these four men share specificity with the 'ones' in Heaney's poem. The 'stretcher' of the poem is also closer to the 'pallet' of Mark's version, rather than the more substantial and permanent 'bed' of Luke and Matthew, highlighting the need for the bearers to hoist and heft the man while he lies on it. The roof may be 'tiled', as in Luke, but the effort involved in the task is more closely correlated to the detail of the operation given in Mark, literally 'unroofing the roof' (2.4).

In the final stanza, the reaction of the bearers as they 'stand and wait' mirrors the amazement of the onlookers in Mark, who exclaim 'We never saw anything like this!' (2.12). Heaney's onlookers, waiting for the friction burns on their hands to fade, experience a similar sense of 'lightheadedness and incredulity', all finding it hard to believe what has happened. The response is one of surprise but also of something quite out of the ordinary having happened, beyond belief. In the Gospel story in Mark, it is the miracle of the healing which has provoked this response; in the poem, it is the hoped-for healing plus the miraculous achievement based on the determination of friendship which provokes it. Here Heaney picks up the details offered in Mark's version in his retelling of the human aspects of the story. He also stresses the implied importance in all of the Gospels on the 'faith' of those who will not let obstacles overcome their determination to bring their friend to a place of healing. In all three, it is in response to 'their faith' (and not the faith of the paralysed man alone) that Jesus brings about the transformation. In a confessional reading of the Gospel story, such as that of Mary Healey, both intercessory prayer and the bringing of a child for baptism may be read as similar examples of Christians bringing to Jesus those who cannot

come by themselves.⁹ However, here, it is the physical burden and cost to the actors in the Gospel story which is the dominant image, rather than the spiritual benefit to the paralysed man.

That focus on the human rather than the divine is continued in the poem 'The Latecomers', written very near the end of Heaney's life. Here, however, the perspective is the central character in the Gospel story, rather than a peripheral one. Heaney imagines the reaction of Jesus to the persistence of the paralysed man and his bearers, and it is not the immediate and positive response which the Gospels portray. The poem takes seriously the role of the crowd which is so important in Luke and Mark's version, blocking the way to Jesus but also leaving him no room to escape, no open door to freedom. Heaney's crowd 'wailed and plucked and ringed him' but, even so, this Jesus notices the arrival of the paralytic. Heaney then transposes the moment of contact to later in the day, after the departure of the crowd, and turns the miracle from a public event into a private moment of decision for Jesus, in whom '[e]xhaustion and the imperatives of love/Vied'. The opposition comes not from the scribes and Pharisees of the Gospel story, but from the competing motivations of the Christ.

While the poem clearly references the story in Mark and Luke of the paralytic lowered through the roof, with its aural representation of the ominous movement of the tiles ('The treble scrape of terra cotta lifted'), there are elements of the Matthean version here. In Matthew there is no description of crowds to fight through in the opening section of the

⁹ Mary Healey, *The Gospel of Mark*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 58.

story, and so no need for entry through the roof. The response of Matthew's Jesus, 'Take heart, my son' (Matthew 9.2), more fulsome than that of Mark and Luke's Jesus, reflects the intimacy of the moment implied in the poem. Matthew's Jesus also adds these words of comfort when he heals the haemorrhaging woman later in the chapter (9.22, compare Mark 5.34), a moment of intense connection in the midst of a time when Jesus is hard-pressed.

An argument could also be made about the identification of the reader of the poem with the response of the crowds who suddenly make an appearance at the end of Matthew's version. The issue of authority is raised in all three versions by Jesus' assertion of the forgiveness of the man's sins. This provokes a charge of blasphemy in the scribes who hear it, developed most fully in Luke and Mark around the authority of anyone other than God to forgive sins. In Matthew, there is a brief charge of blasphemy from the scribes, and Jesus heals the man in order to demonstrate 'the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins' (9.6). However, the response of the crowd is particularly note-worthy in Matthew: they are described as 'afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to *men*' (9.8; *italics mine*). It is in Matthew's Gospel in particular that forgiveness by God is conditional on humans forgiving others. This is seen in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18.21-35), but also in the direct teaching of Matthew's Jesus in 5.23-24 and 6.14-15. In the healing story, Jesus identifies with humanity by forgiving the man and modelling the behaviour of the ideal disciple. Because of Jesus' coming, Matthew suggests here that all have the God-given authority and responsibility to forgive others. The scribes fail to understand this, and are branded as 'evil' for thinking only God has this authority (9.4). The connection between this particularly Matthean reading of the story and Heaney's poem is the reference to the 'imperatives of love' which are named in the concluding line: 'Make

time. Make whole. Forgive'. While the imperatives relate to this most human Jesus who is the subject of the poem, they are also presented as direct appeals to the reader. Continually confronted with the competing needs of others and the self, all are called to follow the example of Jesus who 'assisted and paid heed' to others, despite the personal cost.

Matthew's healing story and Heaney's retelling of it from the perspective of Jesus the man both encourage their readers to live in a way which reaches out and forges new, therapeutic connections.

Heaney's three poems which directly reference the story of the healing of the paralysed man each reflect different aspects of the three Gospel accounts of the story, although there is much crossover between them. They interrogate the story from different perspectives within it, offering new exegetical insights while making a variety of demands on the reader in terms of response. I suggest the poems also use the story as a metaphor or image for further theological reflection: in 'The Latecomers', on the nature of Christ; in 'Miracle', on the nature of humanity; and in 'The Skylight', on the nature of inspiration.

In 'The Latecomers', a phrase used only in Luke's account is explored and expanded to make a Christological point. Luke comments at the beginning of the story that at this time, 'the power of the Lord was with him [Jesus] to heal' (5.17). Most commentators relate this to the presence of the Holy Spirit. The need to make the statement suggests that this power is not always available to Jesus, and Heaney reflects this in the third stanza in which there are those in the crowd Jesus' 'reach had failed to bless'. Heaney's Christ feels '[a] sudden blank letdown' when this happens. Specifically, this feeling is one of '[u]nmaning' for Jesus, the word standing in a prominent position at the beginning of the middle line of the three. The

stanza suggests both a limited power to heal, and a lack of confidence on Jesus' part in his abilities to do so when asked, leading to relief when he thought the paralysed man had gone away. While Jesus' perspective is one of being 'unmanned', a theological reading of this situation would suggest he was 'ungodded'. It was his divine nature which was reduced or negated, rather than his human nature. By choosing 'unmanning', Heaney suggests that reaching to bless is a human imperative rather than (or at least as well as) a divine one.

The image of resurrection which is implicit in the story and in the poem is also given a human rather than divine focus in 'The Latecomers'. In the Gospel story, the paralysed man is lowered into what we might imagine to be a dark space before he encounters the one who orders and enables him to 'arise' and re-enter the world of the alive. This is referred to in the poem, but the break between stanza 5 and 6 brings a moment of ambiguity. The subject of the main clause is 'he', Jesus, from the final line of stanza 4: 'Until he hears them'. Stanza 5 refers to the sound of the tiles being moved, and introduces 'a paralytic on his pallet' in the third line. Stanza 6 opens with 'Lowered like a corpse into a grave,' before continuing with the reference to '[e]xhaustion and the imperatives of love' which 'vied in him [Jesus]'. At the most obvious level, it is the paralytic who is lowered like a corpse. However, when the phrase appears in a stanza which otherwise refers to Jesus, the possibility is at least introduced that he too, if he were drawn to the temptation to ignore or reject, would be choosing the way of death. Resurrection for both Jesus and the man comes from a decision '[n]ot to abandon but to lay on hands'. The poem might be read as proleptically signalling the death of Jesus, which the Gospels signal with their repeated predictions of his coming suffering (Mark 8.31-38; Matthew 16.21; Luke 13.33). It might also be read as promoting human compassion for others as life-giving for both the giver and the

recipient of time, wholeness and forgiveness. The poem's reflection on the nature of the person of Jesus is one in which his human rather than divine aspects are highlighted as meeting the needs of his time and today. Although Daniel Tobin does not connect with the Gospel story in his analysis of the poem, he concurs that 'it is precisely the humanity of Jesus in Heaney's poem, the immanent human being, that catalyzes the poem's vision of transfiguration in the daily groundwork of salvation in not absconding from the work'.¹⁰

In 'Miracle', the forgiveness with which 'The Latecomers' culminates is absent, as is any mention of the presence of Christ as the agent of transformation. In its place is a celebration of humanity and its capacity to bring about 'miracle[s]'. The blessing of having 'those who have known [one] all along' is highlighted by a comparison with a healing story in John's Gospel which often appears in Gospel Parallels as sharing aspects of the Synoptic story.¹¹ In story of the healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5. 1-15), Jesus sees a man among a crowd of infirm people, waiting for the water to be stirred up by an angel. As the man explains, he has been unwell for thirty-eight years, because 'I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up' (5.7). In a close parallel with the healing of the paralytic, Jesus commands him to get up, take his bed and walk, which 'immediately' (5.9) he does. The healing provokes opposition (in this Gospel, characteristically, from 'the Jews' (5. 10) rather than specific groups of religious leaders) because it was carried out on the Sabbath. The man becomes embroiled in the confrontation, but of note is Jesus' warning to him to 'sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you' (5. 14), associating sin and illness in

¹⁰ Daniel Tobin, "'Beyond Maps and Atlases': Transfiguration and Immanence in the Later Poems of Seamus Heaney", in *'The Soul Exceeds its Circumstances': The Later Poems of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Eugene O'Brien (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 300-328, 326.

¹¹ See, for example, Kurt Aland (ed.), *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: Greek-English Edition of the Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Eighth corrected Edition; Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1987), 81-2.

a way that the synoptic version also does, although implicitly. The similarities between the two versions suggests a literary connection at least. The contrast between the experience of the Johannine paralytic and the experience of the synoptic man on his pallet is embodied in the poem. In all of the texts, the man is passive and in need. However, in the poem's reading of the synoptic version, the stretcher-bearers make the difference between a lifetime of frustrated waiting, and action which directly places the man in a healing context, regardless of obstacles and difficulties for them and for him. To be known, the poem suggests, is in itself a form of miraculous healing when that knowing leads to unselfish action.

The connection between human solidarity and wholeness which goes beyond the physical is further explored in the title poem of the collection in which 'Miracle' appears. 'Human Chain' recounts a memory of heaving grain sacks provoked by seeing aid workers passing bags of grain from one to another. '[B]ackbreak's truest payback' is in the relief of the 'letting go', at first described as that 'which will not come again'. But that view is immediately revised in the next, and final, line: 'Or it will, once. And for all.' The final giving up or letting go of life is the sacrifice and reward of taking part in the 'Human Chain' which replenishes the needs of the world. It might be said to be Christlike, in that it is 'for all'. But it reflects on the nature of humanity rather than the nature of Christ, in the 'eye-to-eye' connection on which the salvific action depends. Here is the same, specific, physical effort on behalf of others celebrated in 'Miracle' and elevated to an understanding of existence which is meaningful and life-giving. When the crowd in Mark's Gospel exclaim that they have 'never [seen] anything like this' (2.12), some commentators suggest there is an implication that the Kingdom of God, longed for but as yet unseen (Isaiah 64.4; 1Corinthians

2.9), is breaking in.¹² For Heaney, eschatological hope in the kingdom of God is thoroughly realised, among and within but still with power to amaze and surprise.

In the final poem under consideration here, and the earliest, 'The Skylight', the story of the healing of the paralysed man becomes a metaphor for poetic creativity, a trope which Heaney uses elsewhere in prose reflection on the poetic task. It also appears more obliquely in a wider range of poems, in the pervasive image of the unroofed sky. To understand the significance of that image, we might also note its opposite in his work. As Heaney writes of the return to Glanmore Cottage: 'when I retreated under the slate roof and behind the stone walls of the cottage, it became a sounding post where I could hear down into the very foundations of my sixth-sensed self'.¹³ The sensation is reflected in the second poem of the sequence, 'Lightenings', written in 1988, which begins 'Roof it again. Batten down. Dig in.' Much like the opening octet of 'The Skylight', the poem celebrates the necessity of a sense of rootedness, stillness and solid lines from which 'squarings' might be taken. However, both 'The Skylight' and other poems in the 'Lightenings' sequence discover the rupture of this stillness to be the creative inbreaking of the miraculous or even the divine.

As we have already discussed, the paradoxical effect of creating a skylight in the roof is likened in 'The Skylight' to the witnessing of a miracle in which the constraints of paralysis are destroyed and a sort of resurrection occurs. Afterwards all that is left behind is the sky, 'extravagant' and holding 'surprise wide open'. The spiritual aspect of this experience and its effect on the poetic task is suggested in Heaney's later reflection on that process, in

¹² See, for example, Joel Markus, *Mark 1-8* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 224.

¹³ Heaney, *The Dublin Review*.

which he invokes the same Gospel story to describe the vivification of a poem after the initial inspiration has struck: 'The poem ... must grow its own legs, arise, take up its bed, and walk.'¹⁴ The example he uses is the first of the twelve poems in the 'Lightening' series (the first section of 'Squarings'), 'Lightenings', which draws on the image of the roof open to the sky. In his article on this sequence, Eugene O'Brien comments that "[t]he poems trace a dialectic between the immanent and the transcendent, and are full of openings to the sky and to the air as ways of voicing that which is part of our diurnal experience, but at the same time, also beyond it'.¹⁵ I suggest that reading these images of the opening to the sky alongside the Gospel story of the healing of the paralysed man which is the focus of 'The Skylight' highlights the connection between the transcendent and the creative.

As Heaney explains the genesis of the poem 'Lightenings', the image came to him of a beggar at the door of a cottage with no roof, water in the hearth and moving clouds in the sky. From the image he understood a connection with 'the particular judgement' which he was taught as a child, strange and otherworldly although it was. Heaney comments 'it is that sense of expansion and bewilderment and solitude that found its way into the poem *Lightenings*'.¹⁶ The image, the memory of being a small child and coming across a ruined house and feeling 'exposed' but also 'riddled with light', and the experience of have just finished annotating a selection of W.B. Yeats's poetry, all combined in the process of making the poem come alive and move. Significantly, he describes also the influence on the poem of his presence at the recent death of his parents and the new understanding of 'spirit' it had brought him, again using the image of the open roof: 'I had taken to saying that I felt my

¹⁴ Heaney, *The Dublin Review*.

¹⁵ O'Brien, "'An Art that Knows its Mind'", 133.

¹⁶ Heaney, *The Dublin Review*.

head was now bare to the universe, that the roof of childhood had been removed.’ He speaks of the moment of death as ‘pure change, simple, momentous, and mysterious’ as the spirit leaves the body. Being present in a moment with such momentous and miraculous significance brings a sense of unroofing, new potential and possibility, as it did in the very different context of ‘The Skylight’. This is all reflected in the poem ‘Lightenings’, which presents the image of ‘[a] beggar shivering in silhouette’ in the doorway of a ruined house as the setting of ‘the particular judgement’. The end of the journey is expressed as a solitary experience of ‘old truth dawning: there is no next-time-around’, and the poem closes with the statements ‘Unroofed scope. Knowledge-freshening wind’. Determining the meaning of the recurring image of unroofing here is key to interpreting the poem.

As Irene Gilsenan Nordin notes, the poem may be read as expressing the loss of a previously held belief in the afterlife: there is no chance of another time.¹⁷ Echoes of the parable of the prodigal son are negated and in the scene there is no father waiting, and there is no house of welcome for the returning son. These beliefs are blown away by the ‘[k]nowledge-freshening wind’. Assuming this reading, Dennis O’Driscoll, in his extended interview with Heaney published in 2008, asks if there is a connection between the remnants of Heaney’s Catholicism and the sequence ‘Squarings’, even although this poem is ‘firm that there is no afterlife’.¹⁸ However, as Nordin argues, the image with which the poem opens offers a more positive possibility in the numinous presence of the sky and its ‘[s]hifting brilliancies’. Nordin reads the poem

¹⁷ Irene Gilsenan Nordin, *Crediting Marvels in Seamus Heaney’s Seeing Things*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis (*Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia* 107): Uppsala, 1999, 110.

¹⁸ Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 319.

as the expression of man's state of alienation, which in the clearing of the "unroofed scope" has become exposed, and, once this state is acknowledged, the need is recognised for a rebuilding of the derelict house. Hence, the image of the unroofed space that remains with us, in the last line of the poem is... an expression of absence that in its very articulation creates a clearing, a state of naked awareness, which empowers a new beginning. In this light, the poem is read as a celebration of 'unroofed scope'- the open space which uncovers hidden possibilities and enables one to begin again.¹⁹

It is the 'unroofed scope' which gives the poem its creative power. Heaney's response to O'Driscoll affirms the possibility of this reading of 'Lightening' and by extension the significance of the image: for him, the poem is 'also firmly grounded in a sensation of "scope", of a human relation to the "shifting brilliancies" and the roaming "cloud-life". It's still susceptible to the numinous.'²⁰ Heaney's 'The Skylight' may also be read as a 'celebration of "unroofed scope"' brought about by a new awareness of both the 'numinous brilliancies' of the otherworldly and the inadequacy of that which had previously been thought of as secure. Out of a sort of death, symbolised by the man's paralysis and suggested by the coffin-like imagery of the roof 'low and closed', may come new and living creations, taking up their beds and walking 'away' into worlds of their own, inviting their readers to join them.

¹⁹ Nordin, *Creating Marvels*, 116.

²⁰ O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 319.

The final poem in the 'Lightenings' series brings a further dimension to the use of the unroofed imagery in Heaney's creative imagination. Here the reader is confronted with the image of one of the thieves crucified beside Jesus, as the embodiment of '[o]ne meaning' of 'lightening': the 'phenomenal instant when the spirit flares/With pure exhilaration before death'. The man in his agony is 'scanning empty space', seemingly '[u]ntranslatable' into the heavenly existence promised by the man beside him. In the darkness brought about by the crucifixion and the failure of the sun (Luke 23.44), the roof of the sky is open to the moon which is reduced to the site of his physical and mental pain: 'the moon-rim of his forehead' and the 'nail-craters on the dark side of his brain' are where he aches for the promised 'bliss'. However, he only 'seems' untranslatable into this spiritual state of communion with God. The poem ends with the stating of the promise of the Christ, the Sun of Righteousness: 'This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise'. Helen Vendler, in her discussion of the sequence 'Squarings' as 'a meditation on invisible things', notes that the promise of resurrection has not yet been fulfilled for the suffering man. However, she suggests that 'the brain is still aching for that afterlife; faith and hope hover as possibility'.²¹ The poem offers a moment of 'lightening' for the reader who identifies with the 'good thief in us', who has been shown through the sequence of poems that 'space' is not 'empty', but filled with creative, theological promise and potential.

The Gospel story of the paralysed man brought to Jesus through the roof has echoed directly and indirectly through Heaney's work. Its shape-shifting manifestations in each of the Gospels have offered Heaney a variety of perspectives and meanings to explore and

²¹ Helen Vendler, 'Squarings', in *'The Soul Exceeds its Circumstances': The Later Poems of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Eugene O'Brien (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 71-88, 71, 80.

savour. Perhaps its enduring legacy in his work is the image it leaves behind itself, rather than the moment of miraculous action. The unroofed roof lies open to the sky, its brokenness enabling the surprising and mysterious to enter the darkness of the enclosed room. As Desmond comments, in Heaney's work, 'light itself suggests a gravity-defying force of ultimate meaning and of love, in the universe, a real force whose mystery is just beyond the power of human vision and human expression'.²² The image as it is presented in Heaney's poetry offers those who are prepared to 'squint out from a skylight of the world' while in the act of 'squaring' for their next move,²³ a glimpse of the numinous which is beyond rational explanation. For Heaney, poetry itself is 'a ratification of the impulse towards transcendence' which the open roof enables and inspires in its flooding of darkness with light, drawing the eye ever upwards.²⁴

Bibliography

Aland, Kurt (ed.). *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: Greek-English Edition of the Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*. Eighth corrected Edition. Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1987.

²² John F. Desmond, *Gravity and Grace: Seamus Heaney and the Force of Light*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 117.

²³ Lines from 'Squarings' Lyric 'iii', which begins 'Squarings?'.

²⁴ O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 470.

- Dennison, John. *Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Desmond, John F. *Gravity and Grace: Seamus Heaney and the Force of Light*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009.
- Healey, Mary. *The Gospel of Mark*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Human Chain*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Seeing Things*. London: Faber and Faber, 1991.
- Heaney, Seamus. 'Sixth Sense, seventh heaven'. *The Dublin Review* 8 (Autumn 2002).
<https://thedublinreview.com/article/sixth-sense-seventh-heaven/>.
- Markus, Joel. *Mark 1-8*. The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1999.
- Nordin, Irene Gilsenan. *Crediting Marvels in Seamus Heaney's Seeing Things*. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis (*Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia* 107): Uppsala, 1999.
- O'Brien, Eugene. "'An Art that Knows its Mind": Prayer, Poetry and Post-Catholic Identity in Seamus Heaney's "Squarings"', *Études irlandaises* [Online], 39-2 | 2014,
[URL:http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/3989](http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/3989);
 DOI:10.4000/etudesirlandaises.3989.
- O'Driscoll, Dennis. *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*. London: Faber and Faber, 2008.
- Russell, Richard Rankin. *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.
- Tobin, Daniel. "'Beyond Maps and Atlases": Transfiguration and Immanence in the Later Poems of Seamus Heaney'. In *'The Soul Exceeds its Circumstances': The Later Poems of*

Seamus Heaney, edited by Eugene O'Brien, 300-328. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016.

Vendler, Helen. 'Squarings'. In *'The Soul Exceeds its Circumstances': The Later Poems of Seamus Heaney*, edited by Eugene O'Brien, 71-88. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016.